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FREE THOUGHTS

ON

THE MEANS OF REVIVING AND PROMOTING

THE SPIRITUAL INTERESTS

OF

THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND.

BY A LAYMAN.

“Because of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek thy good.”

LONDON :

JAMES NISBET, BERNERS STREET.

M DCCC XXX.

477.



NOTE.

THE substance of the observations contained in the following pages was originally intended to be offered to the Editor of the Record for insertion in that valuable paper, but as they have been extended so far, as to be inconvenient for that purpose, they are sent forth to the public in the form they now bear. The motto on the title-page is a faithful transcript of the feelings by which the writer has been actuated in preparing his pamphlet for publication; and for its imperfections he has this apology to offer, that he has been able to devote to it only the little leisure he could take from his secular engagements.



FREE THOUGHTS,

§c. §c.

It is impossible to look abroad on the continent of Europe, to contemplate the conflict that is going on between the powers of property and infidelity, the anarchy and confusion it has occasioned by the overthrow of the outworks of the policy of man, the rapid development of the worst passions of human nature, which are like the letting out of waters, and not to feel the utmost solicitude for those venerable institutions in our own country, which are offensive equally to both the contending parties. Upon all our glory may there be a defence.

The singular state of moral and political feeling, and the agitated spirit of the people at home, are additional causes for anxiety and alarm. On the measures which, under

the existing state of things, it may be expedient to adopt, there will be doubtless a great diversity of opinion; but as a Christian nation we should look above merely political considerations, and recognize the claims and authority, the direction and providence of God.

The awful manner in which he has been neglected, and all reference to him omitted, the vain glory that has been displayed in the late revolution in France, the career of scepticism, gaiety, and impiety, that nation seems permitted to run, should be regarded as a warning voice, which cries loudly to us to beware of their excesses; and if the admonition is not attended to, if it does not excite corresponding humiliation and vigilance, similar evils may beset us; there may be perplexity in our counsels, "the wisdom of our wise men may perish, and the understanding of our prudent men may be hid." And let us not deceive ourselves, for God is not to be mocked, or imposed upon by false appearances; it will but add to our condemnation, and accelerate our punishment, if our repentance be not sincere, if we be a people

" who draw near to him with our mouth and with our lips do honour him : but have removed our hearts far from him, and our fear towards him is taught by the precepts of men."

The security of this country depends more on our moral and religious than our political institutions. The Church of England being a national establishment, designed for the good, and supported at the expense of the commonwealth, at the present momentous crisis, naturally engrosses a more than ordinary share of the public attention ; and the design of the following pages is to promote its stability and prosperity, not by seeking to obtain for it an augmentation of political strength, or by multiplying its legal defences, but by increasing and extending its religious influence.

The meeting at Cork, and the controversy to which it gave rise, called up a host of writers on the subject, actuated by different motives, and directing their remarks to different objects. Some, it is to be feared, have been induced, by base and unworthy considerations, to come forth, hoping, by exposing

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the church, to undermine it in the estimation of the public, and ultimately to effect its overthrow: others, who have the most sincere regard to its interests, the utmost veneration for its constitution, its formularies, its doctrines, and its liturgy, and in their writings design to correct what they deem to be wrong, and to improve and perfect what they consider right; but who suppose that the only improvement of which it is capable, is a more equal distribution of its revenues, a better regulation of some parts of its secular concerns, or an abridgment of its services, and a new adaptation of them to the present state of public taste.

To the opinions of this latter class of writers, great deference is unquestionably due, especially as they have been advanced in a manner distinguished by candour and talent: but their views are too limited, and confined to the outworks of the church; they concern only its exterior architecture, whilst they leave untouched its inward decorations, and have not penetrated the arcana of its usefulness and its glory. Such writers have but partially complied with the royal injunc-

tion : “ they have walked about Zion, they have gone round about her ; they have told the towers thereof,” and she may profit by the inspection ; but they have not “ marked well her bulwarks,” they have not duly “ considered her palaces :” and the fact is not sufficiently prominent in their pages, that “ God is known in her palaces for a refuge.”

Valuable as the established church is for the encouragement of learning and talent, the cultivation and defence of those salutary conservative principles, which have always rendered it a valuable auxiliary to the state ; for the firmness with which it has maintained the necessity of morality and subordination in all classes of the community ; and for the stability it has given to the religious principles of the country ; there are considerations of a yet higher order, which recommend it to our veneration, and render its importance and responsibility unspeakably great ; which arise from our regarding it as a spiritual institution, designed to promote the conversion and salvation of its members, to diffuse religious light, to inculcate vital, practical, scriptural godliness, and consequently not having reference to

of its consequences, that we have a vastly extended establishment, interwoven with our political constitution, to which the great majority of the people are attached, to its ritual, its ministers, its services, and its doctrines ; and that they seek for themselves and their families no other religious advantages but what it supplies ; if it mislead them they go astray, and may finally perish. The correctness of their religious opinions, the soundness of their conversion, their happiness here and hereafter, are the momentous consequences of this attachment and preference.

That every member of the church should feel his identity with it, and his personal accountability for its spiritual usefulness, is one of those first principles which, if fairly and resolutely acted upon, will conduce to its prosperity. It is a principle which the dissenters maintain as applicable to themselves, and it has great influence on their conduct ; they are identified with the success and well-being of their cause, they are zealous for its progress, and mourn over its decline, so that if only “in one member it suffers, all the members suffer with it ;” and though the Church of England

is established by law, and a legal provision is made for its maintenance, so that it is not dependant on the individual liberality of its members, that cannot affect its spiritual interests, they are not, and cannot be the subjects of legislative interference, but depend, under God, on the vigilance and zeal, the piety and activity of its ministers and people.

In this age of liberality, as it is termed, it seems almost out of character for any one to avow himself the man of a party; but it is a hollow liberality which forbids it, for if there be any subject on which a man should be fixed and decided in his opinions, it is religion : not for the purpose of condemning others, but of satisfying, and being steadfast himself.

The attachment of a churchman to his church should not be that blind pharisaical veneration which deludes him into the belief that he is safe in consequence of it, that his connection with the church proves his loyalty to the state, and that dissent is inevitably allied to disaffection, revolution, and ruin ; but a judicious enlightened attachment, founded on a conviction of its excellencies, and which

knows how to improve the advantages it affords.

Every conscientious member of the church, as he values its privileges, will invite others to partake of them, and as he feels its responsibility as a Christian institution, will be solicitous to bring others within its pale, to increase its members, and to extend its influence and usefulness. These are duties so obvious that they only require to be named, and they are fully as imperative, if not more so, on the members of a legalized establishment as of a voluntary association.

Ecclesiastical history too plainly proves that there is a lamentable tendency in religious establishments generally, to degenerate from the purity of doctrine and discipline in which they were originally formed, and from this liability the Church of England has not been exempted. With articles and homilies truly scriptural, and a most devotional liturgy, aided by discipline, which in its letter is exemplarily strict, we have witnessed in her clergy an awful departure from the "truth as it is in Jesus,"

and though in conducting her services they have been happily obliged to "hold fast the form of sound words," they have not in their preaching declared the whole counsel of God, as it respects "the faith once delivered to the saints."

This lamented apostacy from the truth, which about forty years back was almost universal, is now fast dying away, and we trust the time is not distant when the reproach it has occasioned will cease from our land; when the Lord will again turn upon us "a pure language," and vital powerful religion shall be preferred to a mere lifeless form, or a system that is inoperative and uninfluential. When we consider how possible it is to have the form without the power of godliness, and how near the former may approximate to all the exterior observances enjoined by the latter, nay, that we are warned, not only that it is possible, that the one may exist without the other, but, as was the case with the Pharisees in our Saviour's days, and the false professors in St. Paul's, that there may be the form of godliness where its power is even denied; we

should be careful, in defining the object we contend for, to fix our attention decidedly and permanently on that substantial change of character, termed conversion, which is so distinctly marked in the word of God.

This important object it is the main design of the church to accomplish in the hearts and lives of its members: their conversion by the grace and spirit of God from a life of sin, to a life of holiness, as the only preparation for future happiness.

When this design is kept steadfastly in view, and every other is made subordinate to it, then indeed “Glorious things shall be spoken of thee, O city of God.” For, “Of Zion it shall be said, this and that man was born in her: and the highest himself shall establish her. The Lord shall count when he writeth up the people, that this man was born in her.” But this object far surpasses human power, and nothing further can be done for its accomplishment by the state, than to furnish the means by which it may be effected; “it is not by might nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts.” The means, however, are put into our hands, and

in dependance on the blessing and direction of the great Head of the church we must use them ; the opportunity is afforded us, and it is our duty to improve it ; and whilst we lament the defects and blemishes of our establishment, the negligent manner in which its discipline is administered, its improper, and sometimes corrupt patronage, and the worldly purposes it is too often made to subserve, it should be our concern to correct and revive it, to extend its influence, and to render it as spiritually or religiously efficient as its capabilities will allow. Such exertions should be individual and general, local and universal ; they should be first directed to home, and to the parish in which we reside ; but they should embrace the church as a whole connected community, and when public feeling, opinion, and zeal, are concentrated on this one object, the revival of its spiritual interests, the putting into full activity its religious energies, it will no longer be subject to reproach as a mere " political church," having only, as it was termed in Bishop Burnet's days, " a parliamentary faith," but as it is in reality, " built

on the foundation of the prophets and apostles, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone : in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord."

But of ourselves we can do nothing ; " the excellency of the power is of God, and not of man ; therefore with our exertions we must connect prayer ; they must " be begun, continued, and ended" in prayer. The spiritual prosperity of the church, like that of individuals, depends on frequent, fervent, importunate, effectual prayer. " I will yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel to do it for them," said the Lord of Hosts, although he had previously promised on his faithfulness that he would make their land like the garden of Eden, " and their waste, desolate, and ruined cities, fenced and inhabited." Let it not be supposed that this is a novel principle, or in any measure inconsistent with the decent and orderly services of our church : it is recognized in every page of the prayer-book, in which we are taught as unreservedly and entirely our dependence on God for all spiritual blessings as if the Church had no

connection with the state, and had to rely on his arm alone. The compilers of our incomparable liturgy were evidently men of great spirituality of mind, who looked upon services and ordinances only as the means through which God communicates his blessings to his faithful worshippers, and their faith was fixed upon him, who "is always more ready to hear than we are to pray, and is wont to give more than either we desire or deserve," and we should enter into their spirit. But as some may be startled at this remark, which they may think enthusiastical, I would ask, is there any thing more enthusiastic, in praying for spiritual than for temporal mercies ; in applying to the God of grace that he would grant to his ministers and people that "they may be filled with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ Jesus our Lord," than in applying to the God of Providence for "moderate rain and showers," or to be saved from an excess of them, as in the prayer for fair weather, so that in either case "we may receive the fruits of the earth to our comfort?" By what canon of criticism can it be justified, that we are to consider the

prayers of the church for temporal blessings as salutary and rational, whereas, if we put a literal construction on the prayers for spiritual mercies, we force them beyond the meaning attached to them by their venerable authors, to subserve visionary and fanatical purposes. If it be a question of scriptural confidence in either, it will be decided in favour of spiritual mercies ; those which are purely temporal must always be sought in submission to the will and wisdom of God : it may be his purpose to punish or correct by the infliction of temporal calamities, or the withholding the good things of this life ; and though it is natural, and it is not forbidden to pray for the removal of such visitations, our prayers must breathe the spirit of resignation and acquiescence. The apostle, St. Paul, thrice besought the Lord that the thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan that was sent to buffet him, might be taken away ; but the answer was, not its removal, but, " My grace is sufficient for thee ;" and a greater than St. Paul, when in an agony, prayed, " If it be possible, let this cup pass from me ; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt."

In spiritual blessings I know of no limits ; the strongest efforts of the loftiest faith are not commensurate to the promises given ; “ Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will do it for you ; ask and ye shall receive, and your joy shall be full.”

A revival of religion in the established church is a purely spiritual blessing, with which the glory of God and the salvation of thousands and tens of thousands, nay, even hundreds of thousands, is connected : with what importunity, then, should we pray for it in public, in private, and in our families, and how much holy humble faith in the divine fulfilment of his own gracious promises should be mingled with our prayers. When the spirit of prayer and supplication is poured out upon the church as it is promised in the latter days to the inhabitants of Jerusalem ; when the people are found “ praying always with all prayer and supplication for all saints,” for their ministers, “ that utterance may be given them, that they may open their mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel ;” when the ministers are exhorting the people, “ Brethren, pray for us, that

the word of the Lord may have free course and be glorified," then true religion will be revived and flourish in our land, the church will be honoured, its services attended and blessed, its ministers useful, and its members holy and happy.

Do we seek for encouragement and direction in the performance of this all-important duty, it is supplied on every hand, in the example of Him who is head over all things to His church, in that of his apostles and the primitive Christians, who all believed that "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much before God:" in that of all believers in every age of the world, and last, though not least, in the practices and injunctions of our own church. Wherever this spirit of prayer and zeal exists, it will be accompanied by a vigilant attention to every occurrence that takes place in our church, and events, that, in ordinary times, would be unobserved, will be regarded with reference to their bearing on its spiritual interests, and consequently as furnishing an occasion for the exercise of prayer and watchfulness.

Every change that takes place on the episcopal bench, is an event of this nature. When we consider the importance of the office of bishop in our church, the power with which he is invested, his rank, his learning, his influence ; when we contemplate him in his relation to his clergy and his diocese, in the discharge of his functions for the maintenance of discipline, the examination and admission of candidates for the ministry, there is a fearful responsibility attached to it, and it has an influence on the spiritual interests of the establishment, in comparison with which, the bishop's connexion with its secular concerns, is of minor importance.

It is not in the power of a bishop to convert his clergy if they are irreligious ; but he may admonish and even correct them : he cannot change their character vitally and essentially, but he may elevate and improve it : he may discountenance the careless, and patronize and promote the faithful ; he may throw the shield of his protection around such of them as are diligent in the discharge of their pastoral functions, advising and encouraging them "as a father his children." In his

visitation charges, which are usually very talented and dignified addresses, he has an opportunity of inculcating truth, zeal, and faithfulness with extraordinary effect; and also in his ministrations in the pulpit, when they are animated by the Spirit of Him "who is the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls."

The appointment and translation of the bishops being quite independent of the people, is a very cogent reason why, in every change that takes place, unceasing prayer should be made in the church that it may be over-ruled and directed for good. The lay members of the church, especially, are too apt to regard such events as matters of course, as occurrences either above their controul, or in which they have no interest: but it is because they do not, on the one hand, sufficiently consider the efficacy of prayer, or on the other, the vast importance to the cause of religion which is attached to the elevation of a bishop of decided piety. The true interests of the church are compromised when such a qualification is lost sight of, and when learning, family connections, or political in-

fluence are the considerations which determine the appointment.

In that very important, perhaps I should be justified in saying most important part of episcopal duty, the ordination of candidates for the ministry, the bishops are particularly commended to the prayers of the church, and we are directed, mark the injunction, to offer up the following petitions "every day" during ember weeks, "that God would so guide and govern the minds of his servants, the bishops and pastors of his flock, that they may lay hands suddenly on no man, but faithfully and wisely make choice of fit persons to serve in the sacred ministry of his church," petitions which are most striking for their appropriateness to the occasion, and for the dignity with which they are expressed.

In the injunction above quoted, we recognize all the principles we contend for, the special interposition of God as the Head of his church, the efficacy of prayer, and the obligation of the members of the church to engage in it on an occasion so interesting to its prosperity: and this recognition of our

principles is here particularly noticed, that every charge of novelty or enthusiasm may be silenced by it. If the church were more faithful and importunate in offering up supplications to Him with whom is the spirit, by which alone ministers can be qualified for their work : the ember weeks would not be to our conscientious bishops, as Burnet says they were to him, "a burthen and grief," because of the ignorance of those who came to be ordained : but we should see our candidates for the ministry, "mighty in the Scriptures," "serving the Lord with all humility of mind," "and thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

Another event which calls for the special exercise of prayer is, when a change takes place in the ministry of a parish. It forms no part of my design to discuss the question of ecclesiastical patronage ; I am aware it is beset on every hand with difficulties, and too often exercised without any regard to the spiritual and eternal welfare of those who are most immediately interested in it. Dr. Smith, in his lectures on the ministerial character, observes with great truth, "the

greatest blessing which God can bestow on any people, is a faithful minister of his word, and one of the greatest curses with which they can be visited, is an irreligious one." The appointment of a clergyman to a parish, is very commonly made irrespective of the people; they have no voice in it, no means of exercising any influence, either directly or indirectly upon it, as it may be vested in an individual or a body, who have no community of feeling with them; no concern for their salvation, no serious thought about the real design of the church and the clergy, and consequently no regard to the qualifications of the candidate, or his fitness for his work.

Oh, if these pages should meet the eye of one who has church patronage at his disposal, I would remind him of the awful nature of his charge; the everlasting well-being of the population among whom it lies, is dependent on the exercise of his fearful trust: and if his preferment be bestowed from motives which, however commendable in merely secular affairs, are unworthy and unchristian when applied to spiritual; such as college attachments, the reward of learning, or as provision

for the younger members of a family, without a due regard to the spiritual qualifications requisite in a minister, the guilt of the "blood of souls," to use the strong language of Scripture, may be on his head, and at that day when it shall be said to him, "Give an account of thy stewardship, for thou mayest be no longer steward," this power will form an awful subject of examination and re-quital. If our church patrons were but alive to the importance of their trust, if they did but feel, as they ought, their accountableness for the manner in which they exercise it, by their influence alone, incalculable good would be effected. Situated as the people are, with respect to their appointments, they have no other resource, but to give themselves unto prayer, and if they are duly sensible of the momentous consequences that depend on the character of the ministry exercised among them, their importunity will be proportionately great.

None, perhaps, are so capable of feeling this subject, as those who, having been favoured with a clergyman who in reality cared for their souls, and watched for them as

one who knew that he must give an account, but have to lament in his successor a man of an opposite character.

The deserted church, the lifeless service, the short moral sermon, the languishing institutions, the decay of piety, the revival of suppressed sports, the triumph of vanity and wickedness, all show that the candlestick is removed out of its place ; the glory is departed, and they have indeed a nominal pastor, but in reality they are as sheep in the wilderness, having no shepherd to feed them with the bread of life.

The faithful ministry of the Word is of so much importance to our individual welfare, and the prosperity of the church, it should be the subject of our continued fervent prayer, and this duty is incumbent at all times, under all circumstances, whatever may be the character of the minister of the parish, where our residence is placed. Truth compels the confession, that in this duty the members of the church have been lamentably defective ; the time, however, is come, when this reproach should no longer be continued, but the state of religion among us should be made the

subject of earnest, importunate prayer, not only in the church, but in our families, and our closets, that God would revive and extend his work of salvation at home and abroad, that his ministers may be blessed, his word may be successful, his people may be edified, and his church prosperous.

Connected with the obligation to prayer is the duty of cultivating, with strictness and discretion, a more intimate acquaintance with those who not only "profess and call themselves Christians," but who are so in deed and truth.

We avow in our creed, our belief in "the holy catholic church," and in immediate connection with it, "the communion of saints," a term which surely cannot be limited to unity of feeling and sentiment merely, but must include in it avowed and visible intercourse. The excellent Bishop Pearson has well described it in his pious and able explanation of this article, in the following words: "We all have benefit of the same ordinances; all partake of the same promises; we are all endued with the graces of the same mutual love and affection, keeping 'the unity of the spirit in

the bond of peace,' all engrafted into the same stock, and so deriving life from the same root: all holding the same head, from which all the body, by joints and bands, having nourishment, ministered and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God." Union is strength, wisdom, and energy; and on no occasion can it be cultivated with greater advantage than for the encouragement of piety in our church. In every other religious community with which I am acquainted, an attention to it is enjoined as one of the conditions of admission to membership, it is enforced as a duty, and prized as a privilege.

Under a dispensation, eclipsed by the glory of ours, "they that feared the Lord spake often one to another, and the Lord hearkened and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name." In the apostolic churches, the "communion of saints" was inculcated, and from the writings of the apostles we may learn its advantages, and the purposes for which it was enjoined. That the circumstances of the primitive churches were different from ours, is admitted: theirs was a

day of persecution, now the churches have rest; then Christianity was not recognized, it was the "sect every where spoken against;" now it forms a part and parcel of the law of the land; but the necessity for such communion still exists in the varied experience, the numerous trials, the discouragements, and even the prosperity of the saints. In what manner or under what regulations meetings may be held of the pious and devout members of our church, must depend on a variety of circumstances, and consequently must be left to the discretion of the clergy; but as they are a privilege all other religious communities afford to their members, and attended with great personal advantage, why should our church refuse to hold them. That in some instances such privileges may be abused, cannot be denied, but what is there good that is not subject to abuse, and that cases of inconsistency will occur, which may furnish to the malevolent an occasion for slander, we also admit; but there is no more weight in this as an argument against them, than if we were to assert that every hospital in the land is inefficient and useless, because some of the patients are discharged as incur-

able, and others obtain only a partial relief. Alas ! how much good has been prevented in the church and the world, by that pusillanimous reasoning which cautions us not to do a present, positive, certain good, for fear of some distant, contingent evil. What other objections can be made to such meetings, whether they be conducted as Bible classes for the young, or communicants meeting for the adults, or in any other way, I am at a loss to conceive ; but I am at no loss in forming my opinion of the benefits that would result to individuals, and to the church collectively, by prayer, admonition, a faithful and familiar exposition of the Scriptures, with a more minute reference to the trials, feelings, duties, and encouragements of the believer, than could with propriety be introduced before the mixed congregations of the Sabbath. The reasonings of the timid would be silenced, the faith of the weak confirmed, the resolutions of the wavering would be established, the presumptuous checked, the mourners encouraged, and all stirred up to " grow in grace and in the knowledge and love of God, and of our Saviour Jesus Christ." Besides the

above, there are various incidental advantages too important to be overlooked, the clergy and their flocks would be brought into closer union, the people would be better acquainted with each other, a salutary moral influence would be diffused and the whole parish would be benefited. This is no new experiment, it has been successfully tried in some parishes, and those clergymen who have already made it, will render a great service to the church by giving to their brethren, and especially to their younger brethren, an outline of their rules and proceedings for the conducting and government of such meetings.

One of the most promising signs of the revival, and promotion of religion in our church, is the attention that is now universally directed to the energies and capabilities of the laity. Happily, we are already arrived at that stage of improvement, when the old objections to lay-agency are dying away, and when it is not considered out of character, nor an usurpation of clerical rights or functions, for a layman to engage in occupations that are much more of a spiritual than a secular nature ; “ To do good and to commu-

nicate forget not, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased." "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and the widow in their affliction, and to keep yourselves unspotted from the world." "Forasmuch as ye have done it to one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me," are injunctions to active zeal and benevolence, most evidently directed to the laity, which they are willing to obey.

The establishment of schools, the formation of Bible and Missionary Associations ; of Associations also connected with the Societies "for promoting Christian Knowledge" and "for propagating the Gospel in Foreign Parts," have called into useful activity the talents of many valuable lay members of our Church, who, but for them, would have remained in obscurity ; they have opened also a field of benevolent enterprize for the occupation of the female sex, which they have entered with their characteristic ardour, and with corresponding success.

In enumerating the various institutions connected with the church, in which the laity can be beneficially employed, it is important

particularly to notice the District Visiting Society, which has already been patronized by some of our most zealous bishops, and will probably soon have sanction of the whole Hierarchy. This Society fills up a chasm in our home charities, which has long been lamented ; while every effort has for years been made to benefit the children of the poor, the adults have been long and fearfully neglected ; and on that account, perhaps chiefly, education has not yielded those moral effects which its friends sanguinely anticipated ; the instructions of the school having been awfully counteracted by the examples at home. This Society lays open to the supervision of the humane and opulent the whole of our poor population, and furnishes an opportunity of administering to their relief in every way that benevolence, regulated by judgment, can suggest ; and by bringing the poor into contact with the rich, the profane and ignorant with the pious, will elevate the tone of their moral feelings, induce habits of sobriety, temperance, decency, and we may hope of attention, to their religious duties, to which they were previously strangers.

In the power granted to the Commissioners appointed by the late Act for the building and endowing of Churches, to vest the right of presentation in those individuals who incur the expense of erection and endowment, many pious and excellent laymen saw an opportunity of doing permanent and extensive good of which they would at once avail themselves ; and it is a privilege also, to which they are surely entitled, and of which, we trust, they will not be deprived, either by any tardiness on the part of the Commissioners to comply with the provisions of the Act, or by any future legislative enactment.

Of the tardiness alluded to, great complaints have already been made, and fears have been entertained that an application will be made to Parliament to alter or expunge the clause in question ; but surely nothing can be more monstrous than that any attempts should be made to discourage benevolent persons from engaging in such a work of Christian charity ; true policy dictates that every facility should be afforded them, that existing impediments should be removed, and that all expenses attending consecration and

settlement should be diminished as much as possible. Why individuals who have the zeal, and deserve the commendation of the worthy centurion,* should be regarded with suspicion, and their benevolent purposes be thwarted, we must leave those to answer, who imagine they can discover in such designs a concealed intention injurious to the National Church ; an imagination not warranted by fact or reason, but originating, we fear, in a deep-rooted hostility to Evangelical truth, and a deep-seated determination to oppose it.

A national church, if it is not a national blessing, is a national burden ; and even when it is not the latter, what reason can be given why the expense it necessarily occasions to the public should not be shared by individuals, when they are voluntarily inclined to bear it.

On this subject it is right to speak out, and not to allow either darkness or mystery to hang about it. In many places, churches have been built at a prodigious expense, but the benevolent intentions of the State have been defeated by the character of the clergy-

* Luke vii. 5.

men who have been appointed to officiate ; and fifty individuals, in consequence, sabbath after sabbath, have not been found within their walls. These are not solitary instances ; many such exist in different parts of the country ; and if the vigilance of the Commissioners was directed against that mass of heterodoxy, they are thus the means of circulating, it would have a right direction, and they would prevent a wide-spreading disaffection to the Church ; but it is not in such cases that their zeal is roused ; it is when applications are made by the most pious, enlightened orthodox members of the Church, who are desirous of seeing the tone of its doctrines restored to their scriptural fulness and spirituality, and its articles and homilies explained according to their original intent and purity. But it is right, not only to speak out, but also to act with promptness and decision, and firmly, but respectfully, to contend for the privilege which Parliament in its wisdom has granted ; and should any attempt be made to take it away, which seems to be confidently anticipated, I trust it will be resisted by the

sincere, conscientious friends of the Church from one end of the kingdom to the other.

There has often been, and it is greatly to be regretted, an extraordinary reluctance on the part of the laity to come forward and avow their principles ; or there are many occasions on which it may be done with propriety, and the good that would result from the independent avowal of them would be permanent and extensive. Why should the National School Society, the Society for promoting Christian Knowledge, and for propagating the Gospel in Foreign Parts, be exclusively under the direction of one class of churchmen, when every subscriber has a voice, and a right to be heard ? And why should the invidious task of remonstrating against some of their unscriptural publications be allotted to a few of the clergy, who have fearlessly come forward on the occasion, and moved for a revision of them. There are laymen of rank, learning, and talent, who ought to watch over the proceedings of those Societies, to oppose them when they are wrong, and to infuse into them a spirit of feeling in

accordance with the design of a spiritual institution, such as an Established Church should ever be considered. Those Societies have been rouzed to great activity in these spirit-stirring times ; and if their vast energies are faithfully put forth, not as the rallying point of a party, not as the test of orthodoxy, but for the glory of God, as connected with the scriptural education of the people, the revival of religion in the Church, and its dissemination in the world, they would be blessings indeed.

In the preceding observations reference has chiefly been made to the laity : in fact, their principal design is to call forth their energies, and to convince them how much the revival of the spiritual interests of the Established Church depends on their exertions, and may be promoted by their zeal, activity, and prayers : but it cannot but be obvious, that much also, nay, even more, depends on the clergy, and I trust they will not deem it presumptuous if, whilst I am exhorting my lay brethren to their duty, I remind them that, without their cordial co-operation, their wise

counsel, their faithful ministrations of the word, our efforts will be greatly counteracted, if not rendered entirely fruitless. We look to them to be "instant in season and out of season," not only in the pulpit "to warn every man and teach every man," but out of it, to sanction our proceedings with their countenance, to animate us by their example, and to assist us with their prayers.

To some of the clergy of our church, I cannot let the opportunity pass without offering my tribute of just affection; they have fulfilled their office with a degree of fidelity, which proves them to be animated by a portion of the spirit of their Master; and though it has subjected them to some obloquy, though it has in some instances barred against them the door of preferment, yet may they "rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is their reward in heaven,"

Alas! that in this enlightened age, when the Bible is universally circulated, and religious knowledge spread far and wide, that there should be found in the bosom of our church, professing to be of her communion,

partaking of her emoluments, and administering her ordinances, those who through ignorance conceal, or through malevolence oppose the truth, who even apply as a stigma of reproach the honourable and scriptural term saint to her most pious members; and the epithet evangelical in contempt to her most faithful and consistent ministers. In addition to the obloquy that has thus been cast upon the more faithful part of the clergy, they have also been charged with disturbing the unity of the church, and causing a schism among its members; but may not this charge with more propriety be brought against those who have advanced it. It is too serious to be passed over with indifference, and has been advanced with a degree of confidence that demands a determined refutation, especially as it has originated with that portion of the clergy, who, by some incomprehensible means, have become distinguished by the title of orthodox.

Take the Articles, Homilies, and Liturgy of our church as the test of the orthodoxy of its ministers; place side by side with them the opinions held by the censors and the censured

on the all-important topics of man's moral depravity and guilt; the nature of conversion from sin to holiness; the terms of a sinner's acceptance with God, and of his justification before Him; the influence of the Holy Spirit in the work of regeneration, the extent and sufficiency of the atonement, and the privileges of the Christian vocation: and by that examination let us decide which of the two parties is entitled to the merit of orthodoxy, and to which is to be attached the blame of schism. Happy will it be for the church when that false theology is banished from our pulpits, which treats Christianity only as a genius or a system, confounds religion with virtue, esteems human effort as meritorious before God, and discovering in man a self-renovating power, makes him the author of his own salvation; and when in lieu of it, they will resound with these unsophisticated truths, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them;" "God who is rich in mercy for the great love wherewith he loved us, when we were dead in trespasses and sins, hath quickened us together with Christ; by

grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves ; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast ;” “ Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us by the washing of regeneration, and the renewing of the Holy Ghost.”

On the faithful preaching of “ the glorious Gospel of the blessed God,” much, very much depends : it is the mighty instrument in his hands which he has specially appointed, and which he condescends chiefly to own for the conversion of the world and the edification of the church.

We rejoice in the possession of a Liturgy and Homilies eminently sound and scriptural, but if the reading desk and the pulpit do not echo the same sentiments, the Liturgy will become a lifeless form, and the Homilies a dead letter. When the first Christian ministry was instituted, the concise emphatic command was given, “ Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature ;” and to the present moment it is not only unrepealed, but it demands the same attention, the same

prominent place in the institutions of the church. Convinced of this and of the sacredness of the obligation, the most eminent and successful of all ministers, exclaimed, "a dispensation of the Gospel is committed unto me, and woe be unto me if I preach not the Gospel." "The scribes," "the wise," "the disputers of this world," with which, alas, our age abounds, may now, as in the days of the apostles, condemn the preaching of the cross as foolishness; but those who derive their wisdom from the Scriptures of truth, know "it hath pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe;" and though they may have to contend with the fastidiousness of the Jews, and the boasted wisdom of the Greeks, our clergy should persist in preaching "Christ crucified, Christ the wisdom of God and the power of God," not as the founder of a sect, or the author of a system, or an example of moral excellence, but as "our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption."

What a wonderful change shall we witness, when all the clergy are actuated by this

spirit, when Christ shall form the burden of their ministry, and preaching him fully and faithfully, shall declare him to be the only Saviour of all men, and especially of them that believe.

Nothing has tended to bring the church so much into contempt with the community as the inconsistent lives of its ministers; but in this respect it must be admitted an improvement, almost universal, has taken place, and at the present period a great reformation has been effected by the influence of public opinion, so that instances of profligacy, such as formerly disgraced the church, are now of rare occurrence: but we regret to add, that it is only partial, the improvement is only limited, and though cases of unblushing irregularity are more rare, a great proportion of our clergy are still notorious for their conformity to the gay and frivolous spirit of the age, and for their partaking of its demoralizing amusements.

This is an evil which may be traced to three distinct causes; the corrupt and unworthy motives by which men are induced to enter the

ministry, the inadequacy and inaptness of the education they receive for it, and the laxity of their admission : the two last alone are within the reach of visible and tangible improvement, and if that be effected they will successfully counteract and oppose the former. To the admission of candidates for the ministry I have already adverted, and a further reference merely to the office of ordination, and to the requisition of the prayers of the church are sufficient to show how much importance is attached to this part of our discipline, and how strict it is, if rightly and duly administered.

On the defective education of the clergy, as another of the causes of their official inefficiency a few remarks may not be improper. While a long course of appropriate study and reading is requisite as a qualification for the other learned professions, and testimonials of ability are demanded as conditions of admission to them, it is to be regretted, that in that of the ministry, unquestionably the most important, the previous preparation should be both unsuitable and insufficient.

In this particular there is a laxity in the

establishment, which I believe has not a parallel in any other well regulated religious community. The classical and mathematical acquirements of the clergy are undoubtedly of a high order, and justly entitle them to be considered as the most learned body of ministers in the world: but in their knowledge of theology, it is evident they have not had equal advantages; it has not formed, as it ought to have done, the principal subject of their studies. Whoever will take the trouble to examine the synopsis of reading and study adopted at the best regulated Dissenting Academies, and at the Scotch Universities, and compare it with the scanty preparation required by our church, must be convinced the advantage is decidedly in favour of the former, and that the system which prevails in the latter, not only admits of, but demands an immediate and effectual improvement.

The practice of reading sermons in our church, has opened a wide door to great abuses, and facilitated the entrance of many an unfit candidate for the ministry. This practice, which is as pertinaciously adhered to

by the orthodox clergy, as they are most improperly styled, as if it was imposed by the authority of the Rubric; was condemned even in the degenerate days of the second Charles, as encouraging indolence and carelessness in the clergy, and since that period to the present it has been prolific of many evils and errors. Not that it is to be entirely condemned; but as it has been adopted so universally, it has prevented the cultivation of the art of extempore speaking, as a part of the qualification of the Christian minister, to whom it is as useful and important as in the Senate, or at the Bar; and I cannot conceive it can be more difficult to the man who has the sublime mysteries of the Gospel for his animating subject, than to him who discusses merely legal or political subtleties. This, however, is rather an incidental consideration, and one on which difference of opinion may exist, therefore only alluded to here as having an indirect bearing upon the great object it is the design of these pages to promote.

In bringing these free, but well-intended remarks to a conclusion, I wish particularly to

press upon my readers the necessity of cultivating personal religion : the quaint admonition is not inapplicable, even on this occasion, “ let every one mend one :” it is by aiming at the promotion of our individual holiness, that we shall most effectually advance the interest of religion in the church, inasmuch as it furnishes at once a stimulus to our zeal, and the only true standard by which our usefulness can be estimated.

The Apostolic order of procedure is, that we first give ourselves to God, and then to the church by the will of God ; and it is only as we feel the value of such a privilege, only as we are impelled by the force of such an attachment, that we shall be solicitous for others to partake of it.

A Christian cannot be indifferent to public opinion, as to the consistency of his conduct or character ; he wisely judges, that what men think of him, they think of his religion, his profession, his Church ; he is therefore vigilant, not only that he may not dishonour them by any unbecoming actions ; but he is careful to maintain good works, not as furnishing any, even the least, foundation of his

hope, but as the necessary fruits of his calling. And from the same motives he most assiduously “ follows whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are honest and of good report.” The love of Christ constrains him, the glory of Christ is the object, and end, and rule of his life ; and to be for ever with him is that “ gain” to which he aspires ; but he feels that “ none can keep alive his own soul,” that there is no truth more appropriate to him than his Saviour’s warning, “ Without me ye can do nothing ;” and therefore it is his concern to walk humbly, depending on the grace and spirit of God.

Religion should be the fixed and ruling habit of our life, it should be the basis of all our pleasures and enjoyments, the motive to every action, the end of every design. Indecision is, perhaps, on no subject so unwise and impolitic as on this ; and decision never brings with it such steadfast peace and tranquillity, as when it is thus called into exercise.

The reason why the lives of so many professors of religion is marked by unhappiness

and inconsistency is, they do not do justice to their principles, or follow them out fairly and fully into all their practical consequences. Holiness and happiness are as essentially connected as ever cause and effect can be; and whenever the one is embraced as a rule, the other will assuredly follow as an end; whilst the lukewarm and half-hearted are represented as particularly offensive in the sight of God, to the spiritually-minded he imparts life and peace.

Personal religion, therefore, is of the greatest importance in the object before us; if this does not exist, there will be no effectual, fervent prayers offered up for "our bishops and curates, and the congregations committed to their charge;" no "communion of saints," though we may still profess to believe in it; no concern for the religious instruction of the young, though we may assist them in their education; no zeal for the conversion of "Jews, Turks, Infidels, and heretics," though we may still, on stated occasions, pray for it; no anxiety to circulate the Scriptures, though we believe in their inspiration and admit their

authority ; no thirsting for the pure, unadulterated Gospel of God, but a preference of those “Prophets who prophesy smooth things.” The primary object, therefore, with every reader, should be to seek, incessantly, to be brought under the influence of true religion ; and then he will be disposed cordially to co-operate in the suggestions now submitted, to promote the spiritual interest of our Zion. “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem, they shall prosper that love thee : Peace be within thy gates, and prosperity within thy palaces. For my brethren and companions’ sakes, I will now say, peace be within thee.”

THE END.



